Demons, toxins, autism, oh my!

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Once upon a time, when a child behaved strangely, stared too long, spoke to no one in particular, or failed to respond to the ordinary rituals of social life, an explanation arrived quickly and with confidence. Something had possessed the child. Some demon, spirit, or malign influence that did not belong. This diagnosis was not subtle, but it was reassuring. The world was still intact. Normality existed. The problem was an intruder. Remove the intruder, and order would return. That story has never really gone away. It has only learned new words.

Modernity congratulates itself on having banished demons, but it has not abandoned demonology. We have simply traded incense for instrumentation and exorcists for experts. Where possession once explained deviation, we now speak of toxins. Where curses once crept through bloodlines, we now trace exposure pathways. Where corruption once entered through sin, it now enters through plastics, preservatives, pesticides, vaccines, microplastics, endocrine disruptors, heavy metals, and any other unnamed residue detected at parts-per-billion levels by machines whose sensitivity outpaces our interpretive restraint. The form has changed. The function has not.

Our contemporary obsession with toxins presents itself as sober, empirical, and science-forward. Who, after all, could be against clean air, clean water, and minimizing unnecessary harm? Beneath this reasonable surface, however, lies something less rational and far more familiar; a diffuse moral panic looking for a material host. Toxins have become our modern demons, invisible yet omnipresent, capable of explaining everything and therefore accountable for nothing. They are blamed not merely for specific, measurable harms, but for a general sense that something has gone wrong with life itself. They do not just make us sick; they make us anxious, alienated, unfocused, sad, strange, and, increasingly, different.

Autism has become the favored exhibit in our modern toxin trial, evidence that something in our environment must be poisoning the children. It appears, to those already primed by fear,

as a living indictment of modernity. Look at the numbers, they say. Look at the diagnoses, at how *different* these children are! Something must be doing this to them. Their sentence rarely finishes, because it does not need to. The demon has already been named.

The trouble is that autism is a remarkably uncooperative demon. It does not behave the way possession narratives require. It does not arrive cleanly after a single exposure. It does not vanish when the suspected toxin is removed. It does not spread uniformly through contaminated zones. It does not respect the moral boundaries of good parenting, clean living, or correct belief. It appears in families who avoided everything they were told to fear, and it fails to appear in others who ignored every warning. It persists across cultures, eras, diets, and technologies, surfacing wherever humans have the patience to notice patterns of cognition rather than merely punish deviation. For a demon, it is stubbornly uninterested in the script.

What autism does instead is something far more unsettling. It refuses to be reducible. It presents not as a single pathology but as a constellation of traits, such as differences in attention, sensory processing, social orientation, pattern recognition, communication, and tolerance for symbolic abstraction. Some of these differences are costly in a world built for rapid social signaling and constant interpretive labor. Others are quietly invaluable. None of them behave like poison. Poisons degrade function in predictable ways. Autism reorganizes it.

This reorganization is precisely what makes it intolerable to a culture addicted to causality. Modern society demands explanations that point backward to a culprit rather than outward to a mismatch. We are comfortable asking what caused this but deeply uncomfortable asking what kind of world makes this difficult. Our toxin narrative allows the former while avoiding the latter. If autism is caused by something, then the problem is contamination, not design. We do not need to rethink schooling, work, communication, or the symbolic density of everyday life. We simply need to purify.

Purification, historically, has always been an attractive project. It promises restoration without humility. It suggests that there was once a clean baseline, a before-time when children were normal and life made sense, and that this state can be recovered if only the

offending substances are removed. This fantasy survives despite having no empirical anchor. There is no historical record of a neurotypical golden age. There are only periods when difference was punished, hidden, institutionalized, or killed. Autism did not appear when plastics did. It appeared when we started looking instead of beating.

Our purification impulse persists, though, because it performs important psychological work. It converts diffuse unease into targeted vigilance. It offers parents an explanation that absolves them of moral failure while simultaneously burdening them with endless responsibility. If the demon is everywhere, then every choice matters. Every bite, every product, every environment becomes a potential site of contamination. Anxiety is not relieved by this framework; it is operationalized. Fear becomes a lifestyle.

This is how toxins fully assume their demonic role. Like demons, they are invisible, morally charged, and endlessly proliferating. The more you look for them, the more you find. Advances in detection do not calm our system; they inflame it. When the threshold of detection drops, contamination increases by definition. Trace amounts become existential threats. Presence is conflated with harm. Correlation is mistaken for causation. The absence of certainty is treated as evidence of conspiracy. And as always, hovering behind the data, is the same whispered promise, if we can just eliminate the toxins, normality will return.

Autism stubbornly refuses to play along. It does not recede in purified environments. It does not dissolve under cleaner diets. It does not revert to baseline when exposures are minimized. Instead, it persists, adapts, and, in some cases, flourishes when environments accommodate rather than constrain it. This persistence is deeply inconvenient. It suggests that the problem is not something that entered our system, but something our system does not know how to handle.

The earnestness of our toxin-autism discourse masks how absurd its underlying logic has become. We are, in effect, telling a story in which a complex pattern of human neurodiversity is explained by a villain that is everywhere, nowhere, and immune to disconfirmation. We are insisting on a monster because we cannot tolerate the alternative. Variation is intrinsic, and our social, educational, and economic structures are narrow, brittle, and poorly suited to minds that do not prioritize constant symbolic negotiation.

Demons were, in their own way, easier. They had intentions. They could be named. They could be fought. Autism offers no such narrative satisfaction. It does not want anything. It is not trying to undermine society. It does not conspire. It simply exists, indifferent to our need for moral clarity. This indifference is often mistaken for threat, because our culture has come to equate difference with danger unless proven otherwise.

The toxin story allows us to maintain this equation while wearing the costume of science. It lets us say we are following the data while quietly selecting interpretations that preserve our preferred beliefs. We ask which chemical did this, which exposure triggered that, which intervention could have prevented the outcome. We do not ask why our environments demand constant eye contact, rapid speech, sensory overload, emotional performance, and symbolic compliance as the price of belonging. We do not ask why deviation from these norms is framed as loss rather than difference. Those questions are harder. They implicate design rather than contamination.

None of this is to deny that some substances are harmful, or that environmental factors influence development. That would be a straw man, and an uninteresting one. The issue is not whether harm exists, but how eagerly we inflate it into metaphysics. Real toxicology is specific, bounded, and, frankly, boring. It deals in dose-response curves, thresholds, and trade-offs. It does not claim that every deviation is evidence of poisoning, nor does it promise moral redemption through purification. When toxicology is used to explain everything, it stops being science and starts being theology.

Autism exposes this theological drift because it cannot be exorcised. The more we insist on treating it as damage, the more we reveal our unwillingness to accept limits to our control. If autism is caused by toxins, then it could have been prevented. If it could have been prevented, then someone failed. If someone failed, then blame can be assigned. If blame can be assigned, then the world remains legible to moral accounting. This is comforting. It is also false.

The alternative is not chaos, but humility. It is the recognition that not all outcomes are authored, not all differences are injuries, and not all discomforts indicate contamination. It is the recognition that modern life itself is an extreme environment, saturated with symbols,

demands, and abstractions that strain many minds, not only autistic ones. Autism becomes visible under these conditions not because it is increasing in essence, but because our tolerance for variation is decreasing in practice.

To line up demons, toxins, and autism is not to equate them, but to expose the shape of our thinking. It is to ask why we keep reaching for supernatural explanations, even when dressed in laboratory coats, instead of questioning the structures that make those explanations feel necessary. It is to point out that every generation believes it has finally identified the invisible enemy corrupting its children, and every generation is wrong in the same way.

Perhaps the most telling feature of our modern toxin-autism panic is how little it helps autistic people. Entire industries have arisen around prevention, avoidance, and purification, while comparatively little effort is spent on accommodation, inclusion, and redesign. The implicit message is clear. The problem is not how society treats autistic people, but that autistic people exist at all. We are framed as evidence of failure rather than as participants in a shared world that has been optimized for a narrow band of cognition.

Demons, at least, were acknowledged as powerful. Autism is treated as tragedy by default, even when autistic individuals report otherwise. Our voices are often dismissed as compromised, as though deviation from the norm disqualifies one from reporting on one's own experience. This, too, is a familiar move. Possessed people were rarely consulted about possession. Their testimony was suspect by definition.

The joke is not that demons, toxins, and autism are the same thing. The joke is that we keep telling the same story because we are afraid of a different one. A story in which variation is not an error, in which explanation does not always point to blame, and in which the task is not purification but coexistence. That story requires giving up the fantasy that we can engineer our way back to some mythical normality. It requires accepting that normal was always a narrower slice of humanity than we admitted.

Demons promised salvation through banishment. Toxins promise salvation through purification. Autism offers no such promise. It offers, instead, a mirror. In that mirror we see not contamination, but a culture that struggles to tolerate minds that do not run its preferred software.

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